

National Adoption Month

The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) will be honoring National Adoption Month, by introducing a family in Washington D.C. who has experienced first hand the process of international adoption.

USCIS plans to capture the many compelling stories of new U.S. citizens who had the courage to embark to a foreign land and embrace the core values in which America was built on: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Follow USCIS as it takes you on a personal journey that delves into the lives of those immigrants who have sacrificed much and sometimes all to become an American.

USCIS begins with a feature of a young child adopted from Cambodia by an American family.

An American Family

"When I finally arrived home in Washington D.C. holding my newly adopted baby in my arms, I felt this overwhelming sense of patriotism and pride."—Susan Neely, Assistant Secretary of Public Affairs for the Department of Homeland Security.

Susan Neely describes the emotions she had experienced bringing the newest member of her family home to the United States for the first time on May 12th, 2001, the day before Mother's Day.



Before adopting Benjamin - who at the time was only 10 ½ months old- Susan and her husband Joseph Jones already had a three year old biological daughter named, Eve. Susan and Joseph wanted to expand their family after their first child, and both knew that they had always wanted to adopt, so in early 2000 they began their search for the newest member of their family.

After more than a year of going through the adoption process, Susan and Joseph's road to adoption led them to the capitol city of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In Phnom Penh a child who neither Susan nor Joseph had ever met and had only seen through pictures awaited their arrival.

According to Susan and her research, the orphanage was considered highly rated. *"The caretakers"* she described, *"genuinely loved the children and the children responded with an emotional attachment."* At first Susan feared if her new child would respond to her the same way he responded to his caretakers.

"He was clinging to me from the beginning. I felt so grateful that he did that because to me he was saying, 'you're the one for me, you're my mother.'"

Soon after, the family and their newly named son, Benjamin, made a long and tiring 33-hour flight back home to the United States. Susan remembers when the plane first touched down on American soil; it was at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City. Susan said she was overwhelmed with happy tears and at that moment she felt even more proud of being an American than ever and grateful that this country gave her and her family the opportunity to bring Benjamin to his new home.

"He became a U.S. citizen right away. The United States granted him immediate citizenship and all the privileges that come with it. What a gift!"

Before Benjamin's arrival into the United States, the Child Citizenship Act of 2000, which went into effect in February of 2001, granted internationally adopted children automatic citizenship upon entering the United States providing they meet certain requirements.

Mother's Day

The day after Benjamin arrived in the U.S., the new family of four along with Susan's parents celebrated Mother's Day by having brunch for the first time as an American family.

"Having Ben home made our family even more complete. That was a Mother's Day I will never forget."

New Purpose

Soon after Benjamin's arrival, the nation will have experienced a tragedy that *it* will never forget. September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked by terrorists who crashed planes into the World Trade Centers in New York City and the Pentagon right in the backyard of Benjamin's new hometown.

After September 11th, many Americans felt compelled to contribute in the fight against terrorism. While some Americans supported charitable organizations that assisted victims of the attacks and their families, others fought in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the war on terror. Benjamin's mother, wanting to do her part to protect her family from future attacks took an appointment to the newly formed Department of Homeland Security.

Susan Neely now serves the country by working as the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs for Homeland Security. Before her current position, Susan Neely worked for the White House in the Office of Homeland Security. She says, in many ways, Benjamin motivated her to join The Department of Homeland Security to protect him and the nation.

"My husband and I knew that joining DHS would mean sacrificing time at home with our kids. But I want both Ben and Eve to know that their mother took on this challenge to protect them during time of war."

Big Boy Ben

Today, Benjamin is 3 ½ years old. His mother likes to call him "Big Boy Ben." When asked why she gave him that nickname, she said – while looking at a picture of him in her office- *"Just look at him. His eyes are so big. He's so cute."* At times, Susan also calls him, "My little politician" claiming that *"he should be an ambassador for adopted children, he's so engaging."*

In many respects, one might say Benjamin takes after his mother. At night, he likes to protect his family from monsters in his closet, much like his mother who works to protect her family and the country everyday at Homeland Security. First Benjamin creates a strategic plan: While sitting in bed, he often asks his mother to sit on one side of him, then his sister on the other side. That way according to Big Boy Ben, he's protected and in turn he can protect his family.

Benjamin is like many American boys his age: He likes French fries, playing soccer with his father, and tags along after his big sister every where she goes. Despite his many interests, Susan has one wish.

"I want him to live the life that he chooses. I want him to be happy, that's all... happy."

Just by looking at him, one might say he really is happy. He has the support of his family and of his country. Just this year, Secretary Tom Ridge, the Director of Homeland Security, and

Eduardo Aguirre, the Director of USCIS held a private citizenship ceremony for Benjamin at Homeland Security headquarters in Washington D.C.

Courage and Faith

After successfully adopting Benjamin, Susan offers this advice to other potential adoptive parents:

"It takes a big dose of courage and faith to enter into adoption. At times going through the proceedings may be difficult, but remember to always keep your eyes on the prize. When I look at Ben I feel triumphant!"

For more information, please go to the information below:

Aguirre Leads Citizenship Ceremony For Adopted Children 11/21/03

[USCIS Announces Program To Streamline Process For Child Citizenship Certificates 11/20/03](#)

[The Departments of Homeland Security and State Honor National Adoption Month By Continuously Improving International Adoption Proceedings 11/17/03](#)

[Inter-Country Adoptions Home Page](#)

[How Do I Apply to Bring a Foreign-Born Orphan to the United States?](#)